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Rising Mideast Violence Takes Ominous Turn

Murders and kidnappings by Arab terrorists and Israel's retaliatory air attack are raising new roadblocks to America's frustrating search for an already elusive peace.

With the latest bloodletting in Beirut and Israel's strike at the Palestine Liberation Organization, Moscow and Washington suddenly faced the same hard question—how to cope with a rising tide of Mideast terrorism.

First came Israel's October 1 attack in Tunisia in response to the murder of three Israelis in Cyprus. The act assures more violence between the PLO and Israel and could doom the peace initiative by Jordan's King Hussein.

Next, a Soviet diplomat, Arkady Katkov, one of four taken hostage, was murdered, his body dumped on a trash-strewn lot. His captors threatened to kill others unless their demands were met.

Then, a shadowy terror group known as the Islamic Jihad claimed on October 4 that it had killed U.S. Embassy official William Buckley to avenge Israel's air strike on PLO headquarters near the North African capital of Tunis. While American officials were unable to confirm Buckley's death, they pointed out that the Jihad has a long record of bloody violence in Lebanon.

Buckley, abducted in West Beirut on March 16, 1984, was one of six Americans being held captive, along with

four Frenchmen, three Britons and an Italian. A seventh American, the Rev. Benjamin Weir, was freed by his captors in Beirut in mid-September.

Buckley's death would bring to 22 the number of American diplomats slain by Mideast terrorists since 1980. The toll of Americans also includes 241 servicemen killed when the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut was bombed in 1983.

The Jihad said Buckley was killed because he was an agent for American intelligence. The 57-year-old native of Medford, Mass., joined the State Department as a foreign-service officer in 1983. Beirut was his first post. He earlier had served the U.S. Army as both an officer and civilian employe in Washington and Vietnam.

There was no apparent connection between Buckley's reported execution and the kidnapping of four midlevel Soviet Embassy officials by another group of Moslem fanatics. But the acts marked a clear escalation of Beirut terror for foreigners. In the past, hostages were taken to secure the release of prisoners. Now, it appears, they are being killed in revenge for events that neither Americans nor Soviets can control.

The previously unknown Islamic Liberation Organization said on October 2 that it had executed one of the Soviets and would kill the others and bomb the embassy unless Syria—Moscow's chief ally in the Mideast—withdraw its support of leftist forces fighting Moslem fundamentalists in Tripoli since September 15. A few hours after the discovery of the Soviet envoy's body, the Syrians suddenly announced a cease-fire in the embattled port city.

Skeleton staff. Moscow promptly began to evacuate all but essential personnel from its embassy in Beirut. In the first wave, 135 Soviets left for Damascus aboard four heavily guarded buses. Druze militiamen in four Soviet-built T-54 tanks and trucks mounting antitank and anti-aircraft guns rumbled into place to guard the fortified embassy compound. Others followed. By the weekend, only a token staff—like that of the U.S. in Beirut—was left in the embassy.

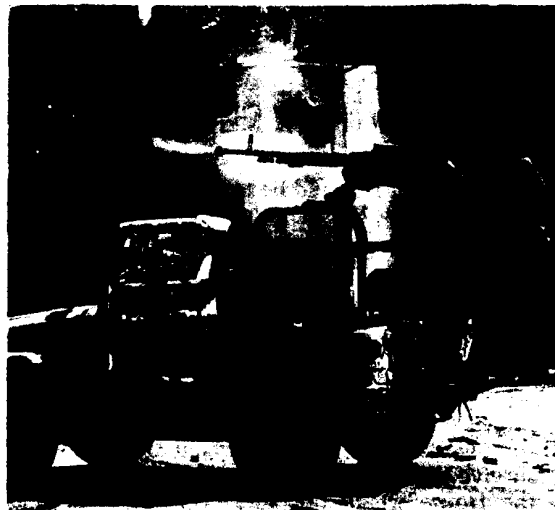
It was an unusual position for the Soviets. Partly because of their Syrian connection, they have been unscathed while American citizens, soldiers and diplomats have fallen to violent attacks throughout the Mideast. Most terrorism directed at Soviet targets in recent years has occurred in Afghanistan and African countries where the U.S.S.R. is backing leftists in conflicts.

Moscow, however, is unlikely to make a permanent retreat from Beirut. The Soviets are not willing to forsake their major Middle East client, Syria, particularly as President Hafez Assad has staked out a position as the foremost adversary of America in the region.

The Israeli raid on PLO leader Yassir Arafat's Tunisian command post outraged much of the Arab world and



Death in Beirut. Soviet diplomat Katkov just before his murder.



War in Tripoli. Attacks by Syrian-backed militia against right-wing Moslems lead to kidnapping of Soviets.



American hostage. Islamic group claims it killed William Buckley.

caused strains between Tunisia—an American friend—and Washington.

The Tunisians condemned the attack as "cowardly" and protested President Reagan's initial defense of it. They also pointed out that Washington was among those that persuaded Tunisia to give sanctuary to the PLO when the Palestinian fighters were forced out of Lebanon by the Israelis.

Tunisia's President Habib Bourguiba summoned U.S. Ambassador Peter Sebastian to the Presidential Palace in Tunis to protest furiously the American position on the attack. As they met, bands of young men ranged through the streets, shouting pro-Palestinian and anti-American slogans. Marine guards at the U.S. Embassy donned battle garb.

The Israelis said they were retaliating directly for the Yom Kippur murder of three Israeli civilians on a yacht in Larnaca, Cyprus, in late September. Prime Minister Shimon Peres claimed to have proof that the PLO's Force 17, the elite troops who serve as Arafat's bodyguard, had a hand in the killings—a charge the PLO denies.

Near miss. Arafat, a survivor of several assassination attempts, was uninjured. The PLO chief had just returned from a trip to Morocco but was not at the 7-acre seaside compound when it came under attack, just as a high-level meeting of his top commanders was about to commence.

The raid, the longest air strike ever conducted by the Jewish state, was carried out by eight U.S.-built F-15 fighter-bombers flown 1,500 miles across the Mediterranean. The attacking aircraft had to be refueled twice while in flight, once on each leg. When the raid was over, the PLO base was in smol-

dering ruins, with the dead and injured strewn across the grounds.

The attack killed at least 73 people and left 100 others badly injured, including several Tunisian policemen.

"We have shown terrorist groups and the world that there is no place where terrorist organizations can be immune to blows from our forces," said Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Washington's muddled reaction underscored the complexity of dealing with terrorism in the Mideast's tinderbox atmosphere.

Reagan's initial response was to justify the attack. Asked by reporters if he felt Israel had a right to retaliate for the Cyprus killings, the President told an impromptu news conference on October 1: "Anyone has, so long as they can pick out the people who are responsible." He added that he "always had great faith in their [the Israelis'] intelligence capabilities."

That put him squarely at odds with Secretary of State George Shultz, who told a gathering of Gulf Cooperation Council ministers at the United Nations: "We need to be clear in our opposition to the acts of violence from whatever quarter they come, and without respect to what is the presumed rationale for them. We certainly deplore acts of violence in the region, including this act of violence."

After Shultz telephoned his concerns to the White House, the administration line began to shift. What emerged was a modified position that neither condemns nor condones the reprisal by America's main Mideast ally. A carefully phrased White House statement called the action "understandable as an expression of self-defense" but added

that it "cannot be condoned." Shultz's concerns were twofold. Aides described him as determined that Washington should say, or do, nothing that might add to tensions in the Mideast. Beyond that, there is growing concern that direct reprisals against terrorist groups will set off a nonstop chain reaction of violence in the region that could take even more American lives. Buckley's captors said that he was to be slain as a direct result of the Israeli attack in Tunis.

Reprisal worries. Washington has long struggled to devise a strategy for countering the terrorist threat. At one point, the Reagan administration itself was considering violent reprisals in Lebanon after terrorists seized American hostages aboard a hijacked Trans World Airlines jetliner. That approach was scrapped because of the obvious danger it posed not only to hostages but to innocent civilians in densely populated Beirut neighborhoods that often shelter the terrorists.

The administration concluded that its only real hope lay in an intelligence-gathering buildup that might disclose advance word of terrorist plans and operations. But most analysts agree that it would take a far more massive effort than is now contemplated to crack the veil of secrecy surrounding the current crop of Mideast terrorists.

For Moscow as well as Washington, the unsolved riddle of terrorism remains: How to curb the violence without triggering more bloodshed in a part of the world where terrorism has become a local industry. □

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